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Hath not thy rose a canker?": Monstrous Generation and Comic Subversion in *King Henry VI, Part 1*

Heather Frazier, *Ohio State University*

In its complication of generic structure, *King Henry VI, Part 1* resembles problem plays such as *Measure for Measure*, which combines the threat of tragic violence with the structure of a marriage comedy. Like *Measure for Measure*, *1 Henry VI* exhibits tonal inconsistencies within the final marriage scene, as it prefigures the instability and violent conflict traditionally associated with tragedy.² However, in spite of its resemblance to the problem plays, *1 Henry VI*'s concluding scene deviates from the comic marriage scene's usual concern with preserving the hierarchical order. In "The Shakespeare Remix: Romance, Tragicomedy, and Shakespeare's 'distinct kind,'" Lawrence Danson examines the history play as a mixed genre, observing its engagement with tragedy, comedy, and the romance. He employs *Henry VIII* as an example of mixed tragic and comic modes, stating, "[a]t the end of *Henry VIII*, English history takes the form of a quest-romance, happily ended [...] to return to a golden age." However, if the tragicomic structure of some history plays lends itself well to "fulsome flattery," as Danson asserts, other history plays, such as *1 Henry VI*, interrogate the genre's use as propaganda. *Henry VI, Part 1* might be read as a partially-inverted tragicomedy, because it contains the ostensible promise of "a golden age" in the middle of the play's action, and ends with a marriage that promises further dynastic strife.

1 Henry VI's structural symmetries, particularly the second and fifth acts' isometric patterns of silence, underscore the conventional reading of the play as Tudor propaganda.³ In 2.4, Richard Plantagenet

1 This essay partially arose from a seminar called *Renaissance Genre and Mode*. I am greatly indebted to Dr. Luke Wilson, the seminar professor, and Dr. Gabriel Rieger for their suggestions.

2 My colleague John Sherer suggested a generic similarity between problem plays like *Measure for Measure* and *1 Henry VI* in a seminar discussion.

3 David Frey's *The First Tetralogy: Shakespeare's Scrutiny of the Tudor Myth* pushes against interpretations of *Henry VI* as Tudor propaganda. However, Frey's argument largely focuses upon *Henry VI*'s and *Richard III*'s kingships, arguing that Shakespeare paints *Henry* as "completely good" and "innocent" and *Richard* "as a politically successful king," undermining the Tudor idea that their deaths represent "divine justice" (2-3). He aligns himself with other critics such as Marion Bodwell Smith, A. P. Rossiter, Wilbur

enjoins the initially-silent nobility to divisive speech, engendering British civil disorder, and in 5.2, the demons, the embodiments of that disorder, suspend their previous intercourse with Joan la Pucelle, their refusal to speak ostensibly anticipating the end of this civic unrest. However, the shifts between speech and silence engage the early modern association between the mouth and what Stallybrass calls the “closed” (125) and “open” (124) bodies, reflecting late-Tudor anxieties regarding the body politic’s potential permeability. The emblem of the rose in 2.4 reifies this permeability, prefiguring the eventual union between the Houses of Lancaster and York, the rose’s symbolism of sexual penetration and decay associating this union with monstrous generation. As a precursor to dynastic marriage, this scene follows the pattern of comic history. However, these descriptions of monstrous generation – monstrous in the classical sense, in that they serve as warnings about the Tudor dynastic order – problematize the notion that the play celebrates the dynasty’s origin, ultimately disrupting its comic structure. When examined in the context of 2.4, Joan’s proposed blood sacrifice in 5.2 illustrates the collapse of the female body with the body politic, deconstructing Tudor propaganda regarding the dynasty’s origin near its end, after Edward’s and Mary’s disastrous reigns, and after it had become clear that Elizabeth would produce no heirs.⁴

The rival houses’ exchange in 2.4 echoes early modern aristocratic courtship rituals, anticipating Henry VII’s eventual marriage to Elizabeth of York. David Daniell views this scene as deriving from Hall’s encomiastic chronicle, *The Union of the Two Noble and Illustrious Families of Lancaster and York*, noting that Shakespeare creates “an imaginary origin [...] of the wars” in the plucking of the red and white roses; as he observes, the dynastic “union” of the two factions ended the wars, “heal[ing]” the division (77). However, in reality, the Tudor monarchs for a long while remained uneasy in their positions. Henry VII quelled multiple Plantagenet conspiracies during his reign, the most

Sanders, and A. L. French, resisting Tillyard’s narrative of the Tudor myth in the history plays (2).

⁴ Dr. Gabriel Rieger reminded me of Queen Elizabeth’s childlessness in a conversation about the historical context of the play. Edward Burns likewise observes “the anxiety produced by the loss of France and the subsequent civil war,” connecting it to “an anxiety re-emerging in [sixteenth-century] culture towards the looming predictable end of Elizabeth’s reign” (22).

notable being Perkin Warbeck's impersonation of Richard Plantagenet. Mary I's government suppressed a plot to marry Edward Courtenay, an earl of the Plantagenet line, to Elizabeth, and place them both on the throne – an attempt to prevent Mary's imminent Spanish marriage by forming a second alliance between the Houses of Tudor and York.⁵ Act 2, Scene 4's parodic Petrarchan language likewise expresses this dynastic lability, as the factions unknowingly employ the *blazon*'s conventional red-and-white rose imagery to prefigure the two houses' violent amalgamation.

In lines 47-48 of 2.4, when Vernon declares his allegiance to Richard Plantagenet's side, stating, "I pluck this pale and maiden blossom here, / Giving my verdict on the white rose side," he conflates the female pudendum with the Yorkist cause for political legitimacy; his description of the rose, an early modern symbol of female virginity (Partridge 180), as a "pale and maiden blossom" (2.4.47), devoid of blood and, therefore, sexual desire, ostensibly encloses the body politic. However, the act of "pluck[ing]" the rose (47), with its suggestion of deflowering, undercuts this impermeability. Furthermore, Somerset's rejoinder, "Prick not your finger as you pluck it off, / Lest, bleeding, you do paint the white rose red / And fall on my side so, against your will" (49-51), directly invokes the red-and-white Tudor rose, the image of blood on the "pluck[ed]" white rose suggesting a body politic simultaneously closed and open, its liminality reifying the dynasty's lability. The taunt that Vernon might "fall on" Somerset's "side [...] against [his] will" (51), or succumb to female wantonness despite his phallus, intensifies this categorical instability, the violence of the imagined exchange suggesting a monstrous origin for the Tudor dynasty.

Richard Plantagenet's subsequent invective, "Meantime your cheeks do counterfeit our roses; / For pale they look with fear, as witnessing / The truth on our side" (2.4.62-64), continues to engage the language of aristocratic courtship, the description of Somerset's cheeks as "pale" roses (63) paralleling the Petrarchan sonnet's familiar *blazon* (Daniell 77), which traditionally dismembers its object (Vickers 272). Here Plantagenet deviates from the *blazon*'s model of fully-articulated

⁵ For further information, see James D. Taylor's *The Shadow of the White Rose: Edward Courtenay, Earl of Devon, 1526-1556*.

body, restricting his description to the cheeks, and therefore intensifying its fragmentary effect. However, the description transcends the mere fragmentation of the body politic, again constructing the English aristocracy as monstrously generative. His assertion that Somerset's "cheeks [...] counterfeit [their] roses" (2.4.62) directly recalls Shakespeare's Sonnet 16, in which the speaker states, "[...] many maiden gardens [...] / [...] would bear you living flowers / Much liker than your painted counterfeit" (6-8), the contrast between the "living flowers" (7) of the sonnet and Somerset's ersatz roses underscoring their monstrous nativity. Like the "painted counterfeit" (8) of the sonnets, which attempts to reveal its subject's essence but ultimately cannot, this invocation of the two Houses' eventual union also suggests diluted legitimacy. When Plantagenet states that Somerset's cheeks "look [pale] with fear, as witnessing / The truth on [the Yorkist] side" (2.4.63-64), he subverts the traditional comparison of cheeks to roses by investing them with a primal emotion, transgressing the Petrarchan object's conventional detachment, and illustrating the body politic's vulnerability to penetration. Moreover, the grammatical ambiguity of this description, with its agent / object "cheeks" simultaneously submitting to the gaze and "witnessing / The truth" (63), disarranges the functions of the body politic's head, the presence of disordered (and, according to Plantagenet, York-affirming) parts within a Lancastrian supporter anticipating the dynastic union's aberrant products.

When Somerset in turn asserts, "thy cheeks / Blush for pure shame, to counterfeit our roses – / And yet thy tongue will not confess thy error" (65-67), he "counterfeit[s]" (66) Plantagenet's previous amalgamation of the two houses, embedding a monstrous product – a fragmented body – within another monstrous product – his "counterfeit" speech, the image's aberrant reproduction perhaps anticipating the Tudor dynasty's disordered succession. The image of Plantagenet's "cheeks / Blush[ing] for pure shame" while his "tongue will not confess [his] error" (66-67) likewise recalls the disordered functions of the previous construction, investing the cheeks and tongue with disjunctive agencies, and therefore, further illustrating the union's instability.

Plantagenet and Somerset continue to engage the trope of rose / pudenda as body politic in their next exchange, further underlining the deviant liminality between closed and open body:

Plantagenet: Hath not thy rose a canker, Somerset?

Somerset: Hath not thy rose a thorn, Plantagenet?

Plantagenet: Ay, sharp and piercing to maintain his truth

Whiles thy consuming canker eats his falsehood (68-71).

The first image of this exchange – Somerset's cankerous rose – reveals the trope's ultimate inadequacy as a symbol of the enclosed body politic; as the rose represents both the female genitals generally and the hymen specifically (Partridge 180), the line invokes both the whore's corrupted body and the virgin's corruptible body, the suggestion of slow-decaying chastity subverting both the early modern fetishism of virginity, which constructs it as a panacea to decay, and the biological reality of intercourse. While the description does not constitute an unambiguous invective against the Tudor monarchy, this insidious decay nonetheless expresses discomfort with the dynasty's lability. Plantagenet's subsequent assertion that the white rose's thorn is "sharp and piercing to maintain [*his*] truth" (70) implicitly anachronizes the Elizabethan metaphor of virgin body as impenetrable body politic (Stallybrass 129), ostensibly deploying this trope to place the body politic under masculine control. However, the presence of the "thorn" (70), or phallus, destabilizes this "truth" (70), as the construction might be read as a coition metaphor. Alternatively, in its use of the masculine possessive, the description invests the rarely-invoked male body politic with a hymen, ostensibly rendering the body politic doubly impenetrable through its masculine gender – traditionally associated with the "closed" body (Stallybrass 125) – as well as the enclosing virginity often fruitfully deployed in the Elizabethan mythos. However, the possibility that the hymen can be penetrated underlines the rose trope's instability, emphasizing the body politic's permeability.

The anachronistic insertion of an Elizabethan trope into a scene addressing the Wars of the Roses' imagined origin, as well as its suggestion of a permeable body politic, aligns with Leah Marcus' argument that the play expresses discomfort with female monarchy. Citing parallels between Joan and Elizabeth, Marcus notes, "the figure of Joan picks up not only contemporary fantasies about Elizabeth in her 'mortal body,' but also more covert [...] fantasies about Elizabeth's

self-presentation in her ‘immortal body’ as a man” (74). The “covert” image of a male body with a hymen in the preceding passage certainly seems to confirm Marcus’ view that the play evinces contemporary repugnance with Elizabeth’s monstrous female reign. However, the metaphor’s location within this scene suggests that it supersedes simple misogynistic anxiety, perhaps positing female rule as emanating from an aberrant dynasty.

Plantagenet’s subsequent vow to wear his “pale and angry rose, / As cognizance of [his] *blood-drinking* hate” (2.4.108-10; emphasis added), as well as his conviction that the nobility’s “quarrel will drink blood” (2.4.133), anticipates Joan’s proposed gesture in 5.2, indicating that her interaction with the demons allegorizes the English aristocracy’s civil disorder. Although Joan does not precisely “[embody]” British civil disorder, as Lisa Dickson argues, the ambiguity surrounding her chastity embodies anxieties regarding the permeable body politic. Edward Burns’ Introduction to the third Arden edition of *Henry VI, Part 1* glosses the ambiguity surrounding the title “La Pucelle,” which signifies virginity, but also suggests whoredom in its near-homophonic resemblance to the slur, “puzzel” (25-26). Her frequent association with the fleur-de-lis, an emblem of virginity,⁶ implicitly connects her to the Houses whose floral emblems often signify the hymen. The image of the “pale and angry rose” suggests a similar ambiguity, as it constitutes a symbol of Plantagenet’s “blood-drinking” hatred, a description that not only evokes the violence of civil strife, but also sexual consumption, mirroring the sexual undertones of Joan’s failed exchange with the demons in 5.2.

Modally, Joan’s encounter with the demons resonates with “the [Bakhtinian] comic and absurd,” as James Paxson notes in his speculation regarding the demons’ staging in “Shakespeare’s Medieval Devils and Joan la Pucelle in *1 Henry VI*” (135). Although his theory that the original performances staged “carnavalesque” (128) demons with heads for genitalia may or may not align with actual staging practices, this scene nonetheless reflects the medieval carnival and Bakhtin’s notion of the “grotesque.” Joan’s offer to “lop a member off and give it” to the demons (36) plainly invokes the carnival’s association with femininity and bodily

6 The fleur-de-lis was frequently associated with the Virgin Mary. See Penny Schine Gold’s *The Lady and the Virgin: Image, Attitude, and Experience in Twelfth-Century France*.

"open[ness]" (Bakhtin 26), her imagined creation of a new orifice, as well as her presumed exsanguination, rendering her body doubly permeable. On the other hand, the demons' odd silence contradicts conventional expectations of the grotesque, as their closed mouths signify their impermeability. Similarly, their ascent "Out of the powerful regions under earth" (32) disrupts the traditional direction of carnival, which as Bakhtin notes, usually entails "downward movement" (370). The demons' upward movement from the "earth" (5.2.32) – usually gendered as female and associated with the open body – mirrors the grotesque process of childbirth (Bakhtin 26). Thus, their emergence from the earth, as well as their refusal of Joan's "member" (5.2.36), suggests their departure from the liminality traditionally associated with the grotesque body (Bakhtin 26); given their embodiment of the dispute between Lancaster and York, this emergence prefigures the incipient Wars of the Roses.

Although Joan does not ultimately enact her offer to "lop a member off" (36), and therefore does not demonstrate the actual "dismemberment of the body politic" (138), as Lisa Dickson describes the play's action, her proposed gesture nonetheless reifies Elizabeth anxieties regarding the body politic's potential penetration. Her revelation that she nurses the demons with her blood implicitly associates English civil disorder with aberrant procreation, as her parodic lactation also carries a bawdy implication.⁷ The demons' current refusal to feed upon her blood seems to signal the eventual end of this civic unrest, as it anticipates the cessation of the English / French conflicts that feed dissension amongst the English aristocracy. However, the termination of her exchange with the demons might alternatively be read as their weaning from her blood, signifying the civil dissension's maturation. Given the date of the play's performance – quite late in Elizabeth's reign – one cannot help but view this maturation as invoking contemporary anxieties regarding the Tudor dynasty's incipient end.

Joan's subsequent meeting with her father symbolically dismembers the body politic. Her father's assertion that he "would the milk / [Her] mother gave [her] when [she sucked] her breast / Had been a

⁷ This implication is present even if one ignores the metaphor of blood consumption as coition. In medieval and early modern Europe, witches were widely believed to engage in sexual intercourse with demons, as evinced by The Witch Hammer's answer to the question of "Whether children can be generated by Incubi and Succubi."

little ratsbane” (5.3.27-29) recalls the demons’ “wont[ed]” suckling (5.2.35), her father’s imagined repudiation of this nurturing gesture tying this exchange to the rift between the Houses of Lancaster and York in 2.4, which Plantagenet calls a “[blood-drinking] quarrel” (2.4.133). As Burns notes, Joan’s implied illegitimacy in this scene “may [be linked]” to “the play’s broader concern with legitimacy” (272n13), this rift within a lower-class family perhaps satirizing the dynastic conflict between the rival houses, as evinced by the nameless Shepherd’s reply to Joan’s declaration of her noble birth: “‘Tis true, I gave a noble to the priest / The morn that I was wedded to her mother” (5.3.23-24). While this comic conflation of aristocratic lineage and currency plainly ridicules Joan’s pretensions, her father’s statement perhaps also underscores the absurdity of the English aristocrats’ dispute regarding their royal bloodlines.

Although 2.4’s parodic courtship disrupts the comic mode’s thematic objectives, the final scene of the play more clearly disrupts comic structure. Like all comedies, it ends in a marriage, but unlike the marriage comedies, this marriage does not promise to resolve the play’s hierarchical tensions. The final act ends with the Earl of Suffolk’s plan to engage in an adulterous relationship with Margaret of Anjou – an affair that would jeopardize the succession. In 2.4, Suffolk implicitly prefigures this affair in his statement that he “frame[s] the law unto [his] *will*” (2.4.9; emphasis added), placing this suggestion of deviant intercourse within a scene addressing the Tudor dynasty’s origin. His subsequent justification of the king’s alliance with Margaret, rather than his betrothed, the daughter of the Earl of Armagnac, recalls this resolve to suborn the law to his sexual desire, as he answers Gloucester’s objections to the broken betrothal with a conflation of political law and tournament etiquette:

As doth a ruler with unlawful oaths,
Or one that, at a triumph having vowed
To try his strength, forsaketh yet the lists
By reason of his adversary’s odds (5.4.30-33).

Suffolk here invokes the phallic associations of the joust, but he encourages the king to “[forsake] [...] the lists” (32); although he of course refers to Henry’s legal betrothal – not his upcoming marriage with

Margaret – this construction cannot help but suggest his desire to emasculate the king through an affair with Margaret. His ambiguous assertion that Margaret is “at [the king’s] command / Command [...] of virtuous chaste intents” (5.4.19-20) suggests an attempt to limit the king’s sexual congress with her, if not entirely discourage him from consummating the marriage.⁸ The king’s agreement to this condition, “And otherwise will Henry ne’er presume” (5.4.22), therefore renders this culmination of the marriage plot a non-marriage, or at least a limited marriage – the implication that Suffolk intends to assume Henry’s place in the marriage bed underlining the succession’s instability and recalling the more recent dynastic lability occasioned by Henry VIII’s marriages and subsequent Acts of Succession.

The king’s subsequent speech of acceptance reifies Shakespeare’s subversive deployment of courtship language within the play’s parodic comic structure. His assertion that “[his] tender youth was never yet attaint / With any passion of inflaming love” (5.4.81-82) recalls the language of attainture previously employed in 2.4 to describe Richard of Conisburgh’s treason against Henry V. Therefore, Henry’s current “inflaming love” (82) perhaps anticipates his own imprisonment and dynastic failure. When Henry states, “I feel such sharp dissension in my breast, / Such fierce alarums both of hope and fear, / As I am sick with working of my thoughts” (5.4.84-86), he unknowingly invokes the dynastic conflict between Lancaster and York; as Burns notes, this statement prefigures the events of *Henry VI, Part 2* and *Henry VI, Part 3* (285n84). This “sharp dissension” (5.4.84) within the king’s body of course reinforces the play’s concern with the body politic’s potential permeability, his characterization of his “thoughts” (5.4.86) as “fierce alarums” (5.4.85) literalizing the traditional association of “love” (5.4.85) with martial conflict. The final part of his conceit, “[...] I am sick with working of my thoughts” (5.4.86), likewise engages the conventional courtship trope of helpless vulnerability, as Henry invests agency in his

8 It is unclear what Suffolk means by “virtuous chaste intents.” In the Catholic Church, marital chastity referred to fidelity to one’s spouse, in addition to certain sexual prohibitions within marriage (such as abstinence on the Sabbath, Lent, and feast days). However, Protestant doctrine regarding sex within marriage is more ambiguous. For instance, in *A Bride-Bush*, the Puritan minister William Whately enjoins couples to restrained enjoyment of the marriage “bed” (33).

“thoughts” rather than himself. In spite of its alignment with courtship conventions, this speech figures the king’s corporeal body and the body politic as inextricable, the natural body’s lability within this dynastic contract anticipating the body politic’s future dynastic instability.

Henry’s opening speech in 5.4 likewise reveals the conventional courtship tropes of the marriage comedy to be incompatible with dynastic stability. Henry describes the effect of Margaret’s “virtues” and “external gifts” (3) in terms of tidal instability, stating that they “breed love’s settled passions in [his] heart” (6); this conceit places Margaret’s erotic and moral endowments within the aggressor’s role and Henry’s “heart” within the role of feminine receptacle, prefiguring Margaret’s usurpation of masculine authority in *Henry VI, Part 2* and *Part 3*. Within Henry’s construction, the king’s natural body – not merely his political body⁹ – is feminine; his employment of gestation imagery here anticipates his monstrous union with Margaret, and by extension, his kingdom’s aberrant hierarchical order. The image of his body as a ship “driven” (7) by report of Margaret’s virtues to either “shipwreck” (8) or “fruition” (9) prefigures Suffolk’s later usurpation of monarchical authority through Margaret.

Henry’s feminized body might likewise implicitly allude to the play’s mixing of genres. In “Foreign Country: The Place of Women and Sexuality in Shakespeare’s Historical World,” Phyllis Rackin charts the incursion of “female presence” in the English history genre, noting the widespread early modern association of the feminine with the comic genre and the masculine with the history play. Citing Falstaff’s comic cowardice in battle, as well as his “inconstancy” and “gross corpulence” (81), Rackin argues that he “[enacts] the female threat to manhood and military honor” (82). Henry’s comic acquiescence to Suffolk, constructed in terms of the feminine, likewise demonstrates feminine incursion into the masculine history genre. Suffolk constructs Margaret’s catalogue of virtues as a literary work – “a volume of enticing lines / Able to ravish any dull conceit” (5.4.14-15), the polysemic term “ravish” (15) again placing Henry in the passive position. Although these lines plainly denote the king’s

9 As Kevin Curran notes, the monarch’s political body is often represented as female. A portrait of François I by Niccolò Bellin da Modena depicts him with a female body and clothing, and the accompanying poem describes him as “a Minerva or Diana during peacetime” (20). Elizabeth’s successor, James I also employed maternal images, as evinced by Lady Anne Southwell’s description of him as “the nursing father of all pietye” (qtd. Curran 21).

deficient mental capacity, the phrase "dull conceit" (15) might also refer to the literary device of metaphor; read in this light, Suffolk places Margaret's "volume of enticing lines" (14) within the superior position, disrupting the hegemonic order.

When Suffolk states, "Marriage is a matter of more worth / Than to be dealt in by attorneyship" (5.4.55-56), he underscores his own "attorneyship" (56) within the matter of Henry's marriage, his subsequent description of "forced [wedlock]" (5.4.62) anticipating England's dynastic conflict. He asks, "[...] what is wedlock forced but a hell / An age of discord and continual strife?" (5.4.62-63), further underlining his "[enforcement]" (62) of Henry's marriage to Margaret, the association of "hell" with the female genitalia reinforcing Henry's feminization in this scene. While this image of "hell" also recalls Joan's summons to the demons in 5.2, Suffolk's construction here is temporal rather than spatial; he calls the "hell" of "[forced] wedlock" (62) "[a]n age of discord and continual strife" (63), the term "age" suggesting an extended era of "discord" (63), and perhaps directly prefiguring the dynastic war between the two houses.

As Burns notes, Suffolk's construction of Margaret evinces a "combination of masculine and feminine force" (284n68-72) that prefigures the couple's disordered alliance. His description of "[h]er valiant courage and undaunted spirit" (5.4.70) implicitly masculinizes her, the word "spirit" invoking the early modern association with semen, and therefore granting her a masculine position in their procreative relationship. Margaret's invasive "force" (Burns 284n68-72) implicitly threatens to penetrate the body politic, her "valiant courage" (5.4.70) suggesting her ability to act as a conqueror, rather than to "beget more conquerors" (5.4.74). His description of Margaret's and Henry's relative conditions also threatens hierarchical instability, as it covertly confirms Margaret's essential superiority:

Whom should we match with Henry, being a king,
But Margaret, that is daughter to a king?
Her peerless feature, joined with her birth,
Approves her fit for none but for a king (5.4.66-69)

His question ostensibly places Margaret within the inferior hierarchical position, as she “is daughter to a king” (67) rather than a monarch herself. However, the second portion of his statement implicitly addresses the “fit[ness]” (69) of her prospective suitors, suggesting that only Henry’s position – not his nature – renders him “fit” (69) for her. Suffolk likewise omits the king’s personal qualities when speculating upon the couple’s potential children, citing Henry’s lineage – his father’s achievements as a “conqueror” (5.4.73) – and Margaret’s natural “high resolve” (5.4.75) in his conclusion that they will “beget more conquerors” (5.4.75).

Henry unknowingly assents to his implied future cuckolding when he dispatches Suffolk to “[execute his] will” (5.4.99; emphasis added) in contracting the betrothal – Suffolk’s employment as an emissary of Henry’s sexual desire prefiguring his implied role as proxy in their nuptial bed. When Henry obliquely “excuse[s]” (5.4.98) his impetuous choice on the basis of his youth, stating, “If you do censure me by what you were, / Not what you are, I know it will excuse / this sudden execution of my will” (5.4.97-99), he recalls his earlier association of youthful passion with legal “[attainture]” (5.4.81), anticipating the House of Lancaster’s downfall.

Although the play’s images of monstrous generation disrupt the second and fifth acts’ symmetrical patterns of silence and speech, its concern with the succession’s legitimacy likely would have reminded Shakespeare’s original audience of more recent dynastic instability. Although the issue of Margaret of Anjou’s infidelity would have had no direct impact on the Tudor succession, as her son died in battle without an heir, questions regarding the succession likely would have recalled the doubts surrounding Elizabeth’s legitimacy occasioned by Anne Boleyn’s alleged adulteries. Margaret’s French treachery perhaps would have recalled recent invectives against Anne Boleyn, which sometimes connected her alleged promiscuity to her service in the French court.¹⁰ Thus, these resonances would perhaps have evoked memories of Anne’s infamy, inviting the audience to contemplate Elizabeth’s origin close to her reign’s end.

10 In *Rise and Growth of the Anglican Schism*, Nicholas Sander associates Anne’s alleged promiscuity with her time at Francis I’s court, stating, “[...] she was called the English mare, because of her shameless behavior; and then the royal mule, when she became acquainted with the king of France” (25-26). As Elizabeth Norton notes in *Anne Boleyn: Henry VIII’s Obsession*, it was actually her sister, Mary Boleyn, who earned these titles.

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